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LINEAGE FORMATION AMONG THE LUO

I. THE SETTING

The Luo people constitute the third largest tribal unit in eastern Africa, and are by far the largest of the Nilotic-speaking peoples, numbering, by 1947 estimates, some 800,000 individuals. They are entirely contained within the three Kavirondo Districts of the Nyanza Province of Kenya except for some thousands who have now crossed its southern border into the Musoma District of the Lake Province of Tanganyika.

In terms of racial distribution the Luo are the spearhead of the great southward thrust of the Nilotic peoples from the Sudan, and of this spearhead the Luo of South Kavirondo and Tanganyika are the tip. The nearest Nilotic neighbours of the Luo are the Padhola of the Eastern Province of Uganda, whose territory comes within a few miles of the northern Luo boundary; but linguistically their nearest relatives are the Alur who now live 500 miles away, partly in the south-western corner of the West Nile District of Uganda and partly over the border in the Belgian Congo. In geographical terms the Luo occupy the coastal plains which border Kavirondo Gulf and the open expanse of Lake Victoria for fifty miles or so on either side of the entrance to the gulf, and also the foothills and uplands to which these plains give way a few miles inland. Although their territory forms a continuous block all round the gulf, it bears no correspondence to the boundaries of the North, Central, and South Kavirondo Districts, but within each of these consists respectively of 1 out of 19, 14 out of 15, and 19 out of 30 locations.[1] These locations form the territory of lineages or groups of lineages.[2]

II. PRELIMINARY ARGUMENT

The purpose of this article is to document certain aspects of the theoretical relationship of lineage to family; to demonstrate and interpret the structural importance of females in a system based on strict patrilineal descent; to show the divergence between norm and practice in Luo lineage concepts and Luo lineage activities; and to explain the process by which new lineages of different types are formed by reference to current or recent examples.[3]

If formally questioned on the point, Luo would admit that the members of a lineage are all the agnatic descendants of its founding ancestor, both male and female, living and dead. However, as Mayer remarks (see *The Lineage Principle in Gusii Society*, I.A.I. Memorandum XXIV, p. 7), 'it is no straightforward matter to define the lineage allegiance of women', and the operative members of a lineage in its observable activities are not those who would have to be included in it according to a strict

[1] The word 'location' is in Kenya applied to the territorial subdivisions of administrative districts and has a quite different connotation from that with which it is used in the Union of South Africa and elsewhere.

[2] See Evans-Pritchard, 'Luo Tribes and Clans', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, No. VII, where these groups are described.

[3] For note, see next page.

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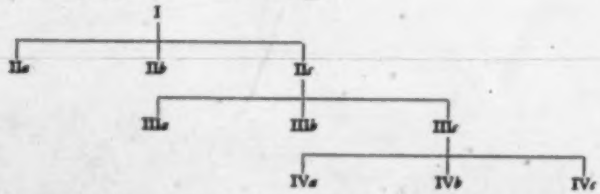
theory of agnatic descent. Most prominent in lineage activities are the group of living male agnates. Dead females, though technically lineage members by descent from the founder in the male line, are of no importance since no segments in their own lineage of origin can ever spring from them. Their only significance was during their lifetime, when they returned from the lineages into which they had married to participate in the rituals of the lineage of their birth. On the other hand, dead females who married into the lineage from outside it, and became eponyms of new lineage segments, are of lasting importance to the lineage as the genealogical points by reference to which parts of the internal articulation of the lineage are defined in theory, and upon whom the grouping of its living members is consequently based in practice. Living females who have married into the lineage are important to it, not only because after death they may become lineage eponyms, but because while alive they are already the heads of groups which Luo regard in theory as the prototypes of lineage segments and, in practice, they are the actual organizers of activities which are both the result and the demonstration of the segmentary principle (see below, p. 37).

The importance of the family to the lineage is shown by the fact that Luo regard every segmentary relationship as having its symbolic prototype within the compound polygynous family. The essential principle of lineage activity is the opposition of co-ordinate segments to one another, coupled with their unity within the same superordinate, itself in similar opposition to other co-ordinates and bound with them in the unity of a still higher superordinate. To the Luo the prototype of this process of segmentation is that aspect of the family cycle (see below, p. 17) in which elementary families are opposed major segments within their superordinate polygynous family, and superordinate segments in relation to the sons who compose them, which sons are themselves the starting-points of major segments in relation to these elementary families. Wives may consequently be considered as the heads of superordinate segments to their sons and of subordinate segments to their husbands. It is important to note that either prototype is equally valid for the Luo; sons in relation to their mother, or co-wives in relation to their husband. Therefore daughters are seen to be of no structural significance though members of the lineage

[1] I have used the following conventions of terminology:



The points numbered in the accompanying diagram represent the eponymous ancestors of a hypothetical series of lineage segments arranged in their genealogical order.

All the segments of series II are *co-ordinate*, and similarly with series III and series IV.

The segments of series III are all *subordinate* of segment IIc, and similarly segment IIIc is the *superordinate* of all the segments in series IV.

The relationship between co-ordinate segments of the same superordinate is expressed in the Luo concept of *libambu*, and I refer to it as their *theory of co-ordination*.

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according to a strict theory of descent, while wives are fundamental to the structure from the start. From the point of view of lineage activity it is indeed true that recruitment to the lineage is of men by descent and of women by marriage.[1] It is the final rite in the sequence of marriage ceremonies which definitively transfers a woman's reproductive powers to her husband's lineage (see below, p. 35, *Riso*). For the Luo, we cannot abstract a man and his sons from the family as the microcosm of lineage,[2] for this is found conceptually—as Luo terminology shows (see below, p. 27)—either in the sons of one mother or the co-wives of one husband. Only when the ideal of family composition is not achieved, because a man fails to beget male issue by more than one wife, or because wives fail to bear more than one son each, can the actual prototype of lineage segmentation be simply a man and his sons. The ideal of family composition, displaying both the segmentary prototypes conceptualized by the Luo, must therefore be regarded as a man with more than one wife, each of whom has more than one son.

What has been said about lineage and family largely explains the other purposes of this article. That the Luo conceptualization of lineage structure in family idiom is something more than a trick of projection is shown by a study of property ownership, marriage, and inheritance in relation to the family. A sufficient account is therefore given of the family system (pp. 16–25) to show the direct influence which these matters can have on the formation of new lineages. The jural arrangements of the family are further correlated with the actual pattern of residence, with the functional alinements of family members to one another, the primary attitudes acquired in early infancy, and the subsequent moulding of these, during the whole period of maturation, into a motivational system which is at once consistent with, and productive of, a segmentary social structure.

In any society structure is an abstraction from observed behaviour, including verbal behaviour, which has a certain degree of continuity over space and time. This behaviour is, obviously, the net result of motivations in the individuals living together in that society. If the society is not changing there will be consistency between the structural behaviour of one generation and the next. A family is, in particular, a direct result of the structural behaviour of a few individuals. But it is also, in general, the result of motivations imposed on the individuals who create it, by a system of upbringing which is itself part of the structured behaviour transmitted from the past. In Luo terms, then, a lineage is the net resultant of a certain type of structural behaviour on the part of all its members from the time of the birth of its founder down to that of its living members. But the activities of its founder were partly determined by the particular characteristics of the family into which he was born, and by the general structural characteristics which determined the form of family composition and child-rearing in it, back from the present to the time of the lineage founder, and long before that.

The reason why I stress certain aspects of the family as the point of departure for describing the lineage system is that such an approach seems to be called for by the material itself, yet it has received less emphasis than the other, in which lineages are treated mainly as groupings inherited from the past, and the structural aspects

[1] See Mayer, op. cit., p. 4.
[2] Cf. Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*, p. 52.

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of the family and the dynamic features which link it to the lineage system are only treated afterwards. It is a question of methodology in relation to the distinction between the clan principle and the lineage principle in social organization. It may be possible to analyse a clan system in terms of clan and family as two distinct principles operating from opposite poles of the social structure. But this is not the most illuminating way of analysing a segmentary lineage system in which the connexion between lineage and family is of the most intrinsic kind. In a lineage system such as that of the Luo you have a graded series of segments from the level of the living sons of one mother or the living co-wives of one husband up to the maximal lineage. There is a continuous increase in numerical size, territorial size, and distance of origin in time, but common principles operate throughout. There is a gradual change in functional emphasis from one end of the series to the other, but no discontinuity. On the other hand, in a clan system there may be no descent groups at all intervening between the clan and the compound family, the discontinuity is more striking than the similarity of principle, and though there are a few common functions there are many more which are quite distinct. While, therefore, both clans and lineages are behavioural systems transmitted from one generation to another, in the case of clans it is only the extant groupings and the behaviour appropriate to them which is transmitted; whereas, in a lineage system, the inculcation of the approved structural behaviour not only ensures that a new generation will fit into a framework of groupings already extant, but that it will also add its own contribution of new groupings on the pattern of the old. In the one case there is only replacement of old members by new within the old framework; in the other, new members indeed replace the old, but the framework itself is also partially renewed, though the principles underlying the renewal are constant.[1] This renewal springs directly from the segmentary structure of the family and gives to the latter an importance for the lineage which it does not have for the clan.

I prefer, therefore, not to use the term 'clan' in the analysis of the lineage system which forms the subject of this article. In my view an extreme segmentary lineage system is based on an implicit principle fundamentally different from that of clan organization, and to apply the word 'clan' simply because a lineage is exogamous, or because it is the widest grouping based on putatively continuous agnatic descent, only obscures an important distinction. There are other societies (e.g. Tallensi) where clan and lineage principles contribute jointly to the social structure and both terms are properly used, but this is not so in the present case. Whereas in a clan system the operation of exogamous rules may be quite precise, in the Luo groups here studied there is a vagueness of definition as between two consecutive levels of segmentation. This is because the higher level is the one which is claimed as exogamous by the most authoritative elders, who still remember its entire genealogical structure, while the younger members tend to remember it only as far as a lower level of segmentation and, if they had their way, would restrict exogamy to this.

In a series of social groups graded according to their age, the aspect of permanence which pertains to any one of them is correlated with its age in relation to the others involved in the same context. But no lineages are regarded by the Luo as really

[1] Cf. Mayer, op. cit., p. 21: 'the idea of *opuolo* (lineage) is essentially one of growth leading to fission'.

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permanent; it is only in relation to a particular transitory situation that they may for convenience be taken as given; as when two segments are in dispute, larger segments of which they are parts may appear to have a relative permanence.[1] Lineages which are exogamous are the largest and oldest of a series the other end of which is found in the segmentary structure of the compound family. The whole series is relative and impermanent because, as it moves forward in time, it is always tending to add new units to itself at one end as old ones drop off at the other. Exogamous lineages are maximal lineages, which are vaguely recognized to be the successors of older groups now forgotten, just as they themselves are destined in turn to be replaced at some future time by newer segments which are at present still regarded as their constituent parts.[2] A clan is expected by its members to be everlasting, and its origin may antedate the earliest events remembered by the tribe as of an historical kind; while lineages of the Luo segmentary type tend to depend on historical processes of settlement which have not yet been obscured by subsequent changes. It is because this is normally so that deviant cases can be accounted for by fictions. Lineages whose genealogies have been fabricated to account for and conform to changes in their structural relations are none the less based on the pattern provided by lineages whose genealogies are not fictional. Clans can be dispersed into far removed sections, yet still forced to recognize common membership through the possession of a common clan name, totem, praise name, or other fixed identifications; but the continued existence of a lineage often depends upon the maintenance of consistency between the recognized genealogical presentation of the relations of its component segments and the pattern of their territorial settlement. Many Luo maximal lineages and their component segments can be represented as both a spatial and a temporal series, either being a consistent projection of the other (e.g. see Figs. 1 and 2 for the temporal, and Figs. 3, 4, 5 for the spatial aspect). A maximal lineage, possibly including a few small groups assimilated to it by group-kinship fictions, may coincide with a tribe[3] where it has maintained this consistent space-time projection, or it may be one of several maximal lineages of roughly equal status, bound by political ties within the same tribe. In Luo lineage theory, then, and also most often in practice, the relationship of siblings at some epoch in the past determines the seniority of their descendants in the present. Hence the genealogies are remembered as an historical validation of the present system of seniority among lineage segments. There may be an opposite process in the case of certain segments, where, as a result of changes in the relations between them, these validations come in time to be based on genealogical fictions, when the original genealogical relations are no longer consistent with the contemporary state of affairs.

On purely linguistic grounds it is difficult to describe Luo lineage organization except on the basis of family organization as the point of departure. For the number of levels of segmentation intervening between maximal lineage and family varies from one lineage to another, and, of course, the number of generations which separate different living members of the same maximal lineage from its founding ancestor varies even more widely. It is impossible to describe such a system adequately by

[1] Cf. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, p. 262.
[2] Cf. Mayer, op. cit., p. 54.
[3] See Evans-Pritchard, 'Luo Tribes and Clans', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, No. VII, p. 4, where 'tribe' is used in this sense and examples are given of different types of tribal composition.

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any series of terms tied to specific levels or even denoting functions characterizing different levels. Any terminology of this type assumes that there is a single system of segmentary articulation for all purposes in every maximal lineage, whereas, among the Luo, certainly two different types of segmentation must be distinguished. For convenience we shall call these two different types class A and class B. The chief characteristic of class A is that all segments in it are corporate landholding units (see below, p. 25), arising from the establishment of lineage settlements and their progressive subdivision. Class B segmentation comprises all those lineages which only emerge into actuality on the specific occasions which demand it. At all other times this class of segments remains a latent basis of grouping. It is especially in answer to ritual needs that they emerge, but it is important to note that the organizational aspect of a ritual occasion (e.g. provision of the necessary food) calls into being a far more extensive segmentary organization than is required for the performance of the ritual itself. This will be fully described later (see below, p. 36). All class A lineages act on occasion as class B lineages too, but the total number of potential class B lineages is far greater than the number of class A lineages extant at any one time. There is some justification for regarding the lineage process as the formation of class B lineages within the compound polygynous family, followed by the establishment, according to certain determinants (see below, pp. 38–43), of some of these class B lineages as class A. It is possible that, in certain circumstances, a class A lineage may relapse again into class B (see below, p. 34). Class B segmentation is genealogical segmentation at its purest, while class A segmentation may be distorted from its genealogical basis by the addition of continuously exercisable functions such as landholding and political order.

Each stage of class A segmentation therefore represents a selection from a large number of possible points of fission derived from both male and female ancestors.[1] When asked about divisions between segments the Luo account for them by reference to the kinship relations of their respective ancestors as represented in the recognized genealogy. These kinship relations are described as if they were those of living persons in an actual homestead. Luo genealogies, then, record far more instances of relations of this type than have ever, apparently, given rise to the segmentation of class A, and the causes which precipitate the latter will be discussed.

In describing both types of lineage noted above, I restrict myself to an *ad hoc* numerical and descriptive nomenclature, by which it is intended to avoid giving any impression of rigidity to what is an exceptionally flexible system. As far as the class A lineages are concerned, segmentation between the level of the maximal lineage and the smallest landholding lineage (primary settlement) may be from twofold to sevenfold; but if as much as sevenfold, the genealogical basis would probably be ignored to the extent of approximating it to a fivefold segmentation, which is common in a large lineage like Karachuonyo (see Fig. 1). Class B segmentation can proceed as far as the genealogy permits, and so may be anything from ten- to twenty-fold in a large lineage, but, of course, it is never more than a small range of the complete system which is brought into operation on any one occasion.

When recent cases of lineage formation are studied, it appears indubitable that the occurrence, at all levels of segmentation, of lineages with female eponyms must be

[1] See Fig. 1 (class A) and Figs. 2 and 6 (class B), also diagram on p. 40.

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interpreted in the light of the relation between husband and wives, between co-wives themselves, and between groups of half-brothers in the compound polygynous family. Every group of uterine brothers with their mother forms a very distinct unit over against all other such units in the same compound family. These matrifocal cells of the compound family are all separate stock-owning and land-holding units, and their semi-autonomy is emphasized in the pattern of residence (see below, p. 17) and in the arrangements for cooking, eating, and other domestic activities. It is strikingly exhibited on ritual occasions (see below, pp. 35–7). Another indication is the fact that the Luo clearly remember the names of their ancestors' wives, whereas other peoples in the Luo-speaking group, such as the Alur, do not.

There is here no question of matrilineal principle intruding on an otherwise patrilineal system. The point is that uterine brothers have strong incentives for rivalry with and distinctness from half-brothers, and the pattern of social grouping thus engendered is passed on to their agnatic descendants, so that lineages with female eponyms may appear at any level of segmentation. They are groups of agnates defined by reference to their progenetrix because she alone can distinguish them from other groups of agnates descended from the same male ancestor. Since only a proportion of class B lineages ever become class A, the selection of class A lineages which have male and which have female eponyms follows no invariable principle, but depends on the particular context in which each one became a class A lineage (see below, pp. 38–43). Since co-wives represent subordinate segments in relation to their husbands but superordinate segments in relation to their sons, there is nothing to indicate that female eponyms are correlated with subordination and male eponyms with superordination in lineage activities.[1]

In most contexts of lineage activity it is possible to find on different occasions lineages with male eponyms acting as major segments of a superordinate with a female eponym, or vice versa, or major segments and superordinate both with female eponyms, or both with male, or even major segments some of whom have male and others female eponyms. However, most lineages which act politically as tribes (see Evans-Pritchard, 'Luo Tribes and Clans', p. 4) have male eponyms. Some exogamous lineages have female eponyms—as being groups of agnates who no longer maintain the ban on marriage with the descendants of co-wives of their progenetrix, because their distance in space and time permits forgetfulness of the bond between them. That on balance male eponyms occur more frequently than female may be due to the fact that while the structure of the family sometimes necessitates the use of female eponyms, there is sometimes a possibility of choice, and in a patrilineal society the choice would fall more readily on a male. Moreover, when spatial contiguity, and the social relations consequent upon it, no longer necessitates their recollection, and names have actually become very remote in time, there is rather more likelihood of forgetfulness of the names of ancestresses who are drawn from a multiplicity of different exogamous lineages than of the names of male ancestors who follow one another in an unbroken male line.

There are further reasons for describing lineage structure first at the level of the domestic and residential units and the smallest territorial settlements, rather than

[1] Cf. Fortes, op. cit., p. 32.

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by starting with the maximal lineages descended from the first-remembered ancestors. The position of these smaller groups on the lineage genealogy is not far removed from that of the present families, so that their interpretation by analogy with family composition is strengthened by the shortness of the time which has elapsed since the actual existence of the compound and elementary families from which they grew. This especially aids the interpretation of female lineage eponyms in relation to the structural position of co-wives in the family. Another advantage is that the segments of a lineage tend to engage the activity of their members in inverse frequency to their size; thus the business of the maximal lineage, though of great importance as being the largest scale of corporate action ever undertaken by lineages, is least frequent, while that of the minimal lineages absorbs the greatest proportion of their members' time. Consequently there will always be a greater quantity of observable behaviour relating to the minimal segments of a lineage than to any of the rest. Among a numerous people such as the Luo, without centralized political institutions, it may well be that the principles of small group organization are relatively uniform throughout, while description of the larger groups is complicated by their great variety of size and the differential effects of population growth, length of settlement, inter-lineage warfare, and the like. The smallest groups are, on the average, the most recent groups, and can therefore be dealt with in terms of observable activity or relatively well-remembered past events, whereas the history of the larger groups is less likely to be authentic and is more strongly moulded by myth. However, though genealogies and lineage traditions may be more properly regarded as expressions of social values than as historical records, they can hardly be irrelevant for the understanding of how lineages develop through time. Other things being equal, there must be a tendency for the maximal lineages of the present to be derived from the minimal lineages of the past, and for some among the minimal lineages of the present to form the source of the maximal lineages of the future.[1]

It is to be noted that not even genealogical segmentation can ever follow a regular pattern, since the number of wives a man marries, and the number of children of each sex whom he begets upon them, do not do so. When the increasing irregularities of growth between one line of descent and another over a long period are taken into account, it will easily be understood that lineage principles, which are necessarily stated in terms of regularities, suffer profound modifications in practice. As will be seen, the genealogical segmentation may be adhered to fairly strictly in ritual contexts and in their organizational background. In economic and political relations, however, the operative segmentation frequently diverges from the genealogical, but

[1] See Forde, *J.R.A.I.*, vol. lxxviii, p. 8: 'particular ecological conditions appear to be prerequisite for extensive proliferation of unilineal kin and the formation of large and successively segmented clans. These appear to be the maintenance of social continuity over a widening series of territorial entities, a condition which requires both considerable physical mobility and facilities for continued territorial expansion.' Judging from the Luo, the maintenance of this social continuity is fundamental, and facilities for continued territorial expansion are more vital to it than physical mobility. The requisite mobility is ensured by the lineage ideology itself, which permits free visiting among kinsmen as long as they occupy a continuous territory. When the conditions for fairly rapid numerical and territorial expansion are not fulfilled, we should expect to find an increase of the fictional element in clanship and lineage organization, a synthesizing of discrete groups, and fictional genealogical unification. Probably Luo conditions until recently permitted an unusual congruity between actual and putative genealogies as a basis of social organization.

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the divergences are glossed over and the relations of segments treated in the same kinship idiom as if the implied regularities had been maintained.

I now proceed to the more detailed description of those features of the Luo family which aid in the interpretation of the lineage system. The lineage concepts of the

FIG. 3

Luo are then discussed, and six cardinal principles abstracted from them. Some statistics are given to show the divergence of lineage activities from the norms implied in the concepts and from the genealogical structure itself. More details are given of the nature of segmentary activity within the extended family, between the extended families of whose members the smaller lineage segments are composed, and between the larger lineages. Lastly, an interpretation is given of the transformation of class B into class A segments as small landholding lineages, from which

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INTRODUCTION

THIS piece of work is the result of a survey carried out in Nyahera among Luo people living round the African Inland Mission, seven miles north-west of the township of Kisumu. This investigation has provided a basis from which generalizations could be made by comparing the conditions in this locality with those in other parts of the Luo country.

Superstitions—beliefs in magic and the work of spirits —are common among the Luo people; and it appears to me that any differences in the conditions existing in various localities can be attributed to the extent to which Christian influence and economic pressure have modified the people's beliefs and manner of life.

Local differences may also be due to customs acquired from the numerous tribes contacted by the Luo in their migration. Remnants of these customs and social practices may still be found in the assimilated tribal groups.

This investigation originated from a desire to study the social development of a Luo girl. I have therefore put forward such information as I think might interest anyone engaged in educational work among the people of this tribe. I hope too that it may interest students in attempting to solve problems which would further the advance of education and broaden the outlook of parents in relation to their children.

The material put forward leaves an enormous field for comparison, criticism, and independent investigation by serious students of Luo society. The nature of the problems dealt with may also make the information appear fragmentary; but I have attempted, within the serious limitations involved; to provide a structure on which

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121 later studies can be based. I have also worked on the assumption that a study of one's immediate background is an essential preliminary to wider investigation.

124 In conducting these studies of social life I have followed the questioning method, and having obtained information from individuals I later discussed that information with a number of other people. I was therefore able to check mistakes arising from purely individual opinion. Altogether nineteen women and eight men were interviewed with regard to family conditions and problems of inter-family relations. I also supplemented by personal observation the information given me on the treatment and feeding of babies. When watching children at play I was sometimes obliged to keep out of view, as children normally feel shy when under the direct observation of an adult. The only group whose play I observed closely was composed of a child-nurse of about ten, my brother's son of eight months (born on August 26th, 1946), my sister's daughter of six, a son of four, and another elder son of about nine. At times I actually watched them playing, but on other occasions I had to visit their play-haunts and examine the articles they had left behind. I noticed that the locations varied very little. This small group gave me a good opportunity to study the play preferences of the two sexes.

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123 With the more mature girls I was able to engage in free discussion, making use of the traditional opportunities for conversation at marriage ceremonies. In short, my field observations were distributed throughout a range of life from infancy to maturity.

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CONCLUSION

121 In order that educational plans may be effective, attention should be paid to those features of social life which most nearly affect education. 'The Luo Girl' is not an attempt to record facts of exclusive interest to the sociologist nor to the psychologist, but it aims to give a picture of the factors at work in the character-building of Luo girls and in the shaping of their attitude to the society in which they live. In short, this book has been written to place certain data at the disposal of those interested in suggesting ways in which the lives of the Luo people can be improved both spiritually and materially. Plans for increased education for Luo girls will no doubt be more effective if the factors which help to shape the character and the attitude of the girls are carefully examined. The customs which have been described are [184] not static and some of them have already ceased to retain their meaning in some districts. Thus there may be wide differences in customs among the Luo people, but it is the principles underlying these customs which should be of interest to us today.

Luo society, like many African societies, is undergoing change. The educator's task is a difficult one. It is only through a careful analysis of the factors which affect its social make-up that he can make an enlightened contribution to its improvement. I have therefore endeavoured in the foregoing chapters to put forward such material as might be of some help in making a balanced plan for the new developments which will affect Luo society.

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